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Community Relations Minutes 05/28/2009

Approved Minutes for May 28, 2009
Meeting of the Community Relations Subcommittee
Arlington School Committee

Attendance:

Community Relations Subcommittee Members

- Cindy Starks, Chair
- Joe Curro
- Leba Heigham

Additional Attendees

- Sheri Donovan, Principal, Thompson School
- Ron Spangler, School Committee Member
- Josh Lobel, Vision 2020 Standing Committee
- Representative Sean Garballey
- Many Thompson parents

The meeting was called to order at 6:38 p.m.

Public Participation:

Jo Anne Preston raised issues around money, stimulus monies and other funds. She expressed support of green school initiatives and stressed that we have to apply and look into these things. She asked who will go after these grants. Ms. Preston also referenced a report on how to make Thompson "green" that was created by the Harvard Design School with the support of Principal Donovan.

Ron Spangler answered Ms. Preston's question about 0% interest bonds, stating that these can be applied for once we have plans and a schedule. In relation to green schools, Arlington requires new public buildings to be LEED Silver rated and the expectation is that Thompson will be as green as possible.

Principal Sheri Donovan noted that there are surveys being worked on for parents, community members, and teachers to ask about things to be done for the Thompson rebuild.

Liz DiNolfo asked about representation of the Thompson School at the Permanent Town Building Committee and wanted to make sure that the record reflects that the Thompson community is very upset about how it was handled. She was also upset that the newly appointed School Committee representatives to the Permanent Town Building Committee and School Facilities Working Group were not at the meeting tonight.

Angela Alton stated that parents acted on their own and were very upset about the allegations that they called and otherwise contacted the School Committee about appointments because they were asked to.

Hillary Rappaport said that School Committee members need to work together to ensure knowledge transfer to those who are new in positions and to make sure information is passed on.

Several parents asked why Mr. Thielman and Mr. Curran were not in attendance. Ms. Heigham stated that it would be inappropriate for one Committee member to speak on behalf of another, noting that appointment to the Permanent Town Building Committee had just been finalized on Tuesday. Ms. Starks said that in her discussion with the School Committee Chair, it was indicated that Mr. Spangler would be in the best position to give an update on progress to date.

Fees Fund Discussion - Josh Lobel, who is the Vision 20/20 standing committee member from School Committee. Mr. Lobel described his idea for a new fund modeled after Dollars for Scholars to help defray fees for the schools. The vision for this fund is that it would cover all activities supported by fees, such that anyone who wants to participate in an extracurricular activity might do so. The fund would offset the revenue that is lost to the schools through fee reductions by broadening the number of people who can help through voluntary contributions.

The eventual goal of the fund would be to remove fees altogether some number of years down the road. The mechanism that we can use is a specific fund that can be set up to offset fee-based activities. The idea was presented to the Finance Committee, Board of Selectmen, and School Committee, and all have been supportive.

Mr. Lobel would like to see an oversight group that could help with the marketing. He is still trying to figure out how the money would flow into the school budget. The law seems to limit us to not having it be an endowment fund.

Mr. Rappaport noted that one potential problem is that some activities are perceived to subsidize other activities as we pay a flat fee or some cost less.

Mr. Lobel shared an analysis of fee contribution percentages to the cost of various activities and stated a hope that this might help everyone paying any fees.

Update on moving School Committee meetings around town

Cindy Starks reported on what she found from conversations with Arlington Community Media, Inc. Setup would require one day, 3 cameras, and 3 camera people to set up at a location and get a live feed to work from someplace else. Also, custodial fees would be incurred at schools if meetings ran after 8 p.m. vs. at the high school where this is not true.

Mr. Curro asked whether it is worth the trade-off to get out into the community. One option would be to not have these meetings on TV. Mr. Curro asked how many of those in attendance watch the School Committee on TV, to which many raised their hands. The number who watch live was fewer. Mr. Curro asked whether it might be worth sacrificing live coverage if the logistics were easier. He also stated a belief that the arrangement of one such meeting in each school per year would provide School Committee liaisons with a concrete duty, and that meetings could include an optional facilities tour, as well as presentations by principals, PTOs, and School Councils.

Ms. Heigham noted that after the last School Committee retreat there was discussion about this and getting out into the community more.

Mr. Spangler explained that School Committees meetings are a difficult forum for public participation and have lots of rules, but that sub-committee meetings don't and that having those in the community might be a viable alternative.

Ms. Starks said that we will be continuing to talk about this and that at least this sub-committee will be moving around to the different schools in Arlington.

Report on Thompson School Rebuild - Ron Spangler talked about what had happened so far and where in the process the school rebuild is currently. We have been voted into the next phase with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) and now we are in the feasibility study phase. We need to find a project manager and create a committee. Right now Superintendent Kathy Bodie is the point person. Thompson School Building Committee (TSBC) can start meeting as soon as all members are appointed by chair of School Committee, chair of Board of Selectmen, and chair of Finance Committee. Chair of Permanent Town Building Committee and – by extension – TSBC is John Cole.

Mr. Spangler stated that he had no idea of the timeline, but that it took Belmont a year to get through this phase. Discussion about town-wide enrollment projections -- looking 10 years out -- will need to take place. We have money for the feasibility study and it has been voted on by Town Meeting and we think that MSBA will also pay part of this fee. The scope of the project is not defined by whether it is a repair or rebuild. Steps are to define need, agree to the need, figure out the most effective way to do that, find the money, and then do the work.

Representative Garballey said that we have impressed the MSBA with the parent, political, and community members who are behind this rebuild. They like that and think that will help us move forward more quickly.

Ms. Alton wanted to know how the community will be involved and alerted to things that might require parent manpower. Also wanted to know how the knowledge transfer will take place from Mr. Spangler to Mr. Thielman. Mr. Spangler reassured parents that he has already spoken to Mr. Thielman, and that they will be meeting ASAP to make sure that this happens; he also expressed his hope to remain active in the process.

Ms. Alton want to know if discussions of redistricting still keep the Thompson rebuild on track.

Ms. Heigham stated that we really need the space in this town and that any redistricting should not affect this effort.

There was discussion of regionalization and if we would have to go through that. Ms. Heigham reported that the Department of Elementary and Secondary education has already advised the Superintendent that Arlington is a poor regionalization candidate, given that our district is only a few hundred students shy of the 5,000 and growing.

Mr. Spangler said that the good news is that we have already authorized the town share of funds and – with any luck -- we probably don't have to go back to the voters for another override in order to rebuild.

Mr. Curro moved to adjourn. His motion was seconded by Ms. Heigham, and by unanimous vote, the meeting was adjourned at 7:52. All attendees vacated the premises by 7:55.